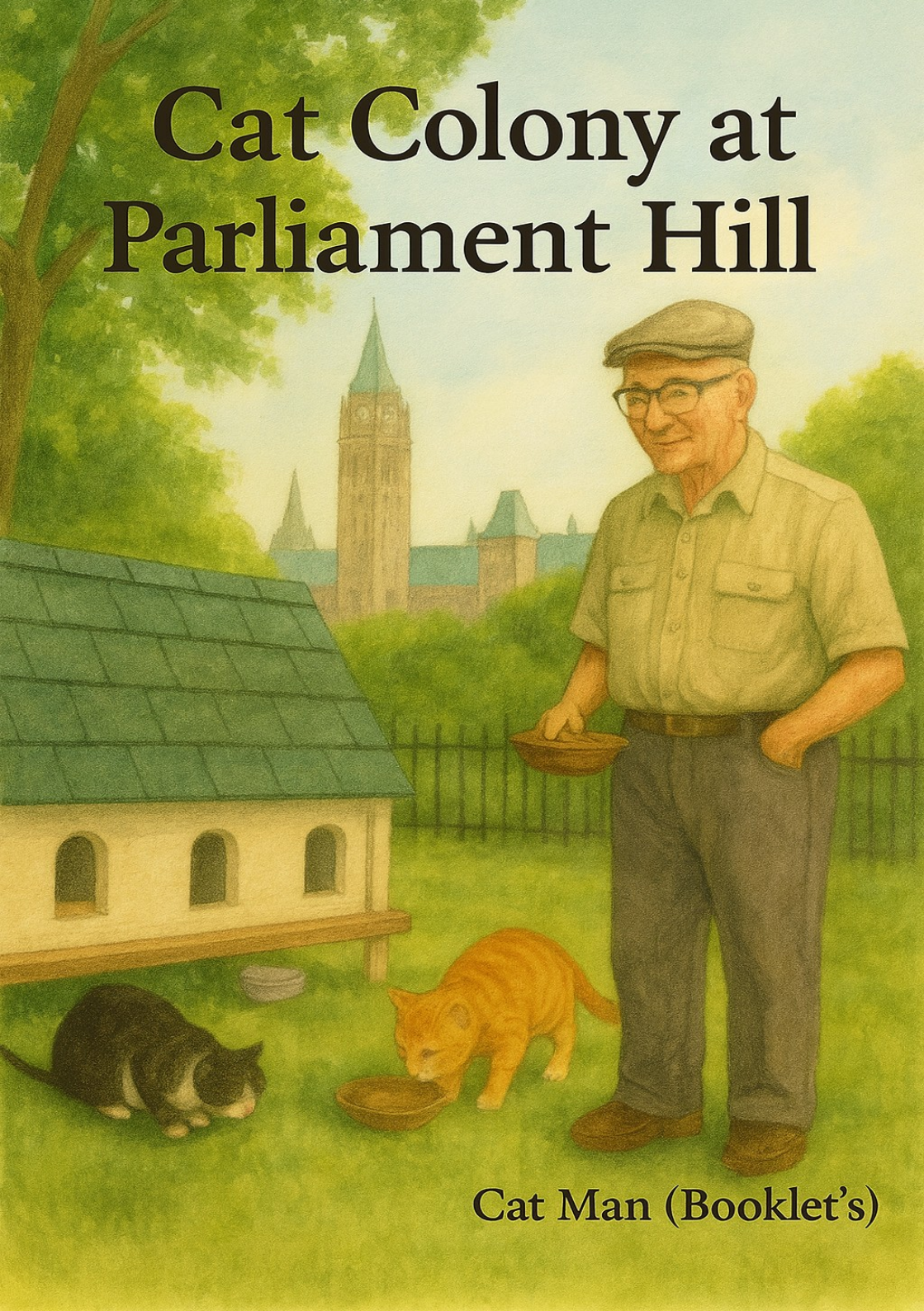
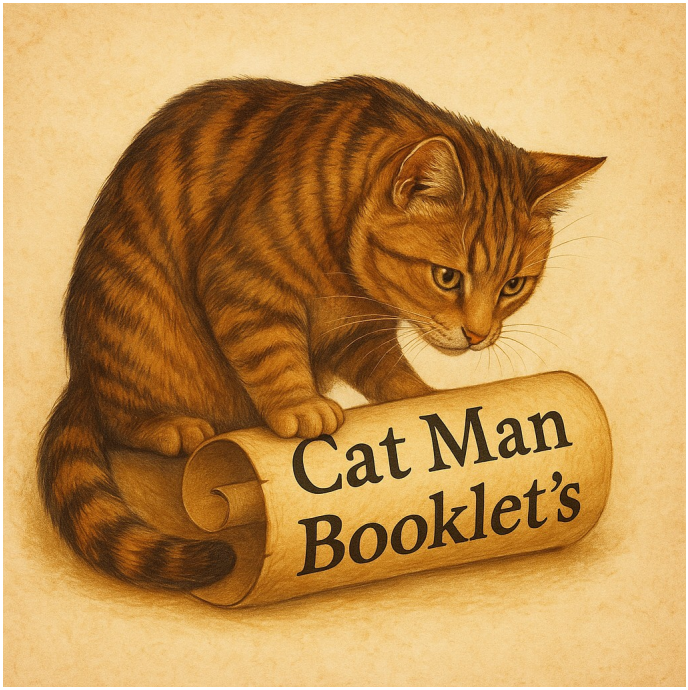
Cat Colony at Parliament Hill



Cat Man (Booklet's)

The Cat Colony on Parliament Hill in Ottawa

A Historical Overview



Hrsg: Cat Man (Booklet's)
Godshorn (Germany) 2025

Chapter 1
The Cat Colony on Parliament Hill in Ottawa
A Historical Overview

Parliament Hill in Ottawa, a nine-hectare site in the heart of the city, is home to Canada's parliamentary buildings and is recognized as a National Historic Site of significant architectural and symbolic importance. Alongside this formal political environment, an unexpected community existed for nearly a century: a colony of cats. This report explores the history, care, public perception, and cultural significance of this remarkable colony until its closure.

From Pest Control to Beloved Residents
The Early History of the Parliament Hill Cats

The story of the cats on Parliament Hill began in 1924. At that time, cats were brought into the newly completed Centre Block to address a rat and mouse infestation in the basement. The cats successfully fulfilled their task and reduced the rodent population.

However, because the animals were unneutered and reproduced quickly, they were expelled outdoors later the same year. This initial introduction and subsequent removal shaped the fate of the colony as semi-feral residents of Parliament Hill.

The immediate need for pest control outweighed any long-term planning for the cats' welfare. Rapid population growth due to the lack of spaying and neutering is a well-known issue in unmanaged animal groups.

This led to the quick decision to relocate the cats outdoors — a reactive measure rather than a proactive one.

Despite being removed from the building, the cats continued to help control rodents on Parliament Hill until 1955, when chemical pest-control methods replaced them. Their long presence suggests a degree of tolerance or continued recognition of their usefulness by those working on the Hill. The shift to chemical methods reflects broader societal trends toward "modern," seemingly more efficient solutions, even though it ended the cats' indoor role.

The Formation of the Outdoor Colony

In the 1970s, a local resident, Irène Desormeaux, began feeding the stray cats regularly and established the colony at a fixed location. Before her involvement, gardeners and other staff members had already been feeding the cats informally. Desormeaux's efforts marked a shift from passive tolerance to active care and signaled the beginning of the colony as a recognized group on Parliament Hill.

This indicates a growing sense of responsibility toward the animals. Informal feeding by gardeners shows that a relationship already existed, even if unofficially. Desormeaux's initiative formalized that care and provided stability for the colony's development.

Another key figure was René Chartrand, who became involved in the mid-1980s. He built the first shelters and, after Desormeaux's death in 1987, took over the cats' full-time care.

In 1997, he constructed more elaborate shelters resembling early European settler homes along the St. Lawrence River. For his dedication, he received the Heroes for Animals Award in 2003. Chartrand retired for health reasons in 2008 and passed away on December 7, 2014.

Chartrand's decades of commitment transformed the colony into a well-established and well-maintained community. His award highlights the level of public recognition he received. The fact that he was granted one of the few civilian passes to access Parliament Hill after September 11 illustrates the significance of his role.

The elaborate shelters he built show a substantial investment of time and resources. The special access he received reflects the trust he earned within the parliamentary community.

Growing Volunteer Support

Starting in 1997, more volunteers joined the effort, including Brian Caines and Klaus Gerken. In 2005, Gerken began documenting the colony's activities in a blog. Over time, the volunteer team grew to eight people, all donating their time to care for the cats.

The growth of the volunteer group demonstrates increasing public and personal commitment to the cats' welfare. Gerken's blog served as a valuable record and likely contributed to greater visibility and public interest. The participation of several volunteers shows a shared sense of responsibility and affection toward the cats. The blog also provided a way to share information and stories, strengthening community engagement.

Chapter 2
The Guardians of the Colony
The Dedicated Individuals and Organizations Behind Its Care

The care of the cat colony was made possible through the tireless efforts of devoted individuals. Irène Desormeaux and René Chartrand played central roles as primary caregivers over many years. Brian Caines and Klaus Gerken also contributed significantly by helping organize the colony, supporting its daily operations, and documenting its history. Numerous additional volunteers assisted with feeding and caring for the cats on a daily basis.

Alongside the dedication of private individuals, the colony also received support from organizations. The Alta Vista Animal Hospital provided free veterinary care and vaccinations. The company Purina donated cat food regularly. Funding for the colony came from public donations.

The care of the colony was a collective effort that relied on committed volunteers, local businesses, and the goodwill of the public. This reflects a broader social value placed on animal welfare. The involvement of a veterinary hospital and a pet food manufacturer shows a degree of professional and corporate support. The reliance on public donations highlights the colony's popularity and the positive sentiment it inspired in the community.

Chapter 3
A Parliament of Paws
Insights into the Cats of Parliament Hill
Numbers, Traits, and Notable Figures

The population of the colony fluctuated over the years. It reached its peak in the early 2000s with around 30 cats. Around the turn of the century, a trap-neuter-return (TNR) program was introduced, which led to a gradual decline in numbers. By the end of 2012, the population had decreased to just four cats. The implementation of the TNR program reflects a shift toward a more humane and sustainable approach to managing a feral cat population, prioritizing population control over uncontrolled growth.

The decision to introduce TNR demonstrates a growing awareness of animal-welfare principles and a move away from potentially harmful methods of population management. The program's success in reducing the colony's size is evidence of the volunteers' committed efforts.

The available information does not specify breeds, but it mentions "stray cats" and "feral cats." Many of the cats were likely abandoned pets. Feral cats are known for their ability to adapt to cold climates. The absence of breed information suggests that the colony consisted mainly of mixed-breed domestic cats, as is typical in feral populations. The reference to abandoned pets underscores the human role in creating and sustaining such colonies.

Several cats became well-known within the colony. “Fluffy” was frequently referred to as the “Cat Prime Minister of Canada.” “Coal” was the last surviving cat of the colony and was adopted in 2013. The volunteers’ blog mentioned additional cats such as Spot, Bugsy, Ti-Gris, Max, and Bébé. The naming of individual cats and the emergence of notable figures like Fluffy and Coal reflect the personal connection between the volunteers, the public, and the animals.

Naming the cats helped create a sense of individual identity and made them more relatable. The nickname “Cat Prime Minister” is a playful example of how the public interacted with the colony.

Chapter 4
More Than Just Cats
Public Perception and the Colony's Popularity

The cat colony on Parliament Hill developed into a popular tourist attraction. In good weather, hundreds of people visited the cats each day. Journalists and television crews from around the world traveled to Ottawa to report on this "political cat phenomenon." The colony was even mentioned in tourist brochures. It became an unexpected and charming attraction that added a unique element to any visit to Parliament Hill.

This highlights how informal or accidental phenomena can take on cultural significance. The sheer number of visitors, including international media, indicates widespread fascination with the colony. Its inclusion in official tourism materials further solidified its status as a noteworthy site.

The cats were also beloved by local residents. Local dignitaries, including former prime ministers, visited the colony regularly. The affection shown by the people of Ottawa suggests that the colony was more than a tourist curiosity; it held a special place in the hearts of local residents and offered a touch of nature and whimsy in an otherwise formal political setting.

The visits of prominent political figures show that the colony's appeal transcended social and professional boundaries. The regular presence of local visitors reflects a deeper community connection.

The colony was interpreted symbolically in different ways. Some saw it as an expression of Canadian tolerance and gentleness, while others believed that domesticated animals living outdoors in one of the world's coldest capitals challenged those stereotypes. These differing interpretations show how the colony resonated with various aspects of Canadian identity and invited reflection on the relationship between nature and civilization.

The contrast between the feral cats and the political seat of the nation created a unique cultural narrative, one that encouraged contemplation of national character and unexpected harmony between the natural and the political world.

Chapter 5
Facing Challenges Controversies and Changing Management of the Colony

The decision to close the cat colony was partly driven by concerns about the animals' welfare during Ottawa's harsh winters. The increasing age and medical needs of the remaining cats also played a role. Although the colony was extremely popular, the decision to close it ultimately prioritized the well-being of the aging cats and acknowledged the limits of an outdoor refuge in such a demanding climate.

The volunteers' choice to end the refuge, despite its popularity, demonstrates their strong commitment to animal welfare. The growing medical needs of older cats further supported this decision.

It is also believed that heightened security measures on Parliament Hill may have contributed to the closure. In the modern era, increasing security concerns surrounding major public buildings made an unsupervised animal colony a potential risk, even if this was not cited as a primary reason.

In the years following September 11, security measures around government buildings became much stricter. An open animal sanctuary, even a beloved one, could be seen as a potential vulnerability.

Managing a feral cat population in a public space presented various logistical and ethical challenges, from ensuring the cats' welfare to handling external factors

such as unwanted newcomers and interactions with other wildlife and humans. Other animals also benefited from the food and shelters provided for the cats. There was even an incident involving vandalism or theft of the donation box.

Feral cat colonies are inherently dynamic and difficult to control. The presence of other animals using the resources added another layer of complexity. The incident with the donation box illustrates the potential for negative human interactions.

Over time, changes were made to the colony's management. A trap-neuter-return program was implemented to control the population. Cats that were abandoned or found their way to the colony were usually turned over to the Ottawa Humane Society. Eventually, the remaining cats were adopted, marking the final phase of colony management.

The evolution of this approach — from merely allowing the colony to exist, to implementing TNR, and finally to adopting out the cats — reflects a growing understanding of best practices in animal welfare and a proactive effort to ensure humane outcomes for the animals. The decision to find homes for the remaining elderly cats demonstrates a final act of care for their well-being.

Chapter 6
The End of an Era
The Final Years and the Closure of the Refuge

The number of cats in the colony gradually decreased due to the TNR program and natural mortality. In 2013, the last four cats — Spot, Bugsy, Ti-Gris, and Coal — were adopted by volunteers and private individuals. Coal was adopted by Danny Taurozzi.

In January 2013, the refuge was officially closed at the request of the volunteers. The cat shelters were removed on January 12, 2013, by Public Works and Government Services Canada.

Coal, the last surviving cat of the colony, remained present in the public consciousness through social media. His recent health issues and the public support for his care also became known. The final adoptions marked the end of a unique chapter on Parliament Hill.

Coal's continuing story kept the memory of the colony alive and demonstrated the lasting impression the cats made on those who cared for them and on the wider public.

The decision to close the refuge only after all cats had been adopted underscores the volunteers' commitment to their welfare. Coal's ongoing presence in the media shows that public interest in the colony endured even after its physical closure.

Chapter 7
A Lasting Pawprint
The Cultural Significance of the Parliament Hill Cat Colony for Ottawa

The cat colony on Parliament Hill was a distinctive and unforgettable feature of Ottawa, often mentioned alongside more traditional landmarks. It uniquely reflected Canadian values such as tolerance, compassion, and a gentle sense of humor. The strong bond between the volunteers and the cats, as well as the affection shown by the public, was remarkable.

The colony's origins as pest controllers and its long presence on Parliament Hill created a rare blend of natural and political history. Artwork inspired by the cats was even produced, and there was interest in establishing a more permanent memorial.

The Parliament Hill cat colony grew far beyond its practical beginnings and became a beloved cultural symbol of Ottawa. It represented unique aspects of Canadian identity and highlighted the enduring appeal of animals in human life. The desire for a memorial reflects the colony's lasting impact on the community.

Conclusion

The history of the cat colony on Parliament Hill in Ottawa is a remarkable narrative spanning nearly a century. What began as a practical solution to a pest problem evolved into a cherished and unique part of Canada's capital. The unwavering dedication of volunteers such as Irène Desormeaux and René Chartrand transformed a group of stray cats into a well-cared-for community that captured the hearts of both locals and visitors.

The colony reflected Canadian values in a striking way and offered an unexpected contrast to the formal political environment of Parliament Hill. Despite its popularity, concerns about animal welfare — and possibly security considerations — led to a gradual reduction of the colony through a trap-neuter-return program and ultimately to the adoption of the final cats in 2013.

Yet the memory of the Parliament Hill cats endures within Ottawa's collective consciousness, demonstrating the deep connection between humans and animals and the lasting impression these unexpected residents left on Canadian history.

René Chartrand * 1921 † 2014

Timeline of Key Events in the History of the Parliament Hill Cat Colony

- 1924: Cats introduced to the Centre Block for rodent control
- 1924: Cats expelled outdoors due to rapid reproduction
- 1955: Chemical pest control replaces the cats' role in rodent management
- 1970s: Irène Desormeaux begins feeding and stabilizing the colony
- 1980s: René Chartrand becomes involved and later assumes full care
- 1997: New, elaborate shelters constructed; volunteer involvement increases
- Early 2000s: Colony reaches peak population of about 30 cats
- 2000s: Implementation of trap-neuter-return (TNR) program
- 2013: Final four cats adopted; colony officially closed and shelters removed

Key Individuals Involved in the Care of the Colony

- Irène Desormeaux – Early caregiver and founder of the stable colony location
- René Chartrand – Longtime primary caregiver and builder of improved shelters
- Brian Caines – Volunteer support and organization
- Klaus Gerken – Volunteer and chronicler of the colony's history
- Alta Vista Animal Hospital – Provider of free veterinary care
- Purina – Donor of regular cat food supplies

*Klaus J. Gerken - * 1949 † 2022*

Appendix – Memories in Photographs

The following photographs show some of the people and cats who shaped life around the Parliament Hill Cat Sanctuary over many years. They offer a small, selected glimpse into a time when dedication, compassion, and community turned this special place into a refuge — for animals as well as for people.

Shown here are volunteers who came every day in all weather conditions to feed, care for, and document the cats. Some faces are familiar from reports and recollections — such as René Chartrand, known as the "Catman of Parliament Hill," or Klaus J. Gerken, who captured countless moments of daily life with his camera.

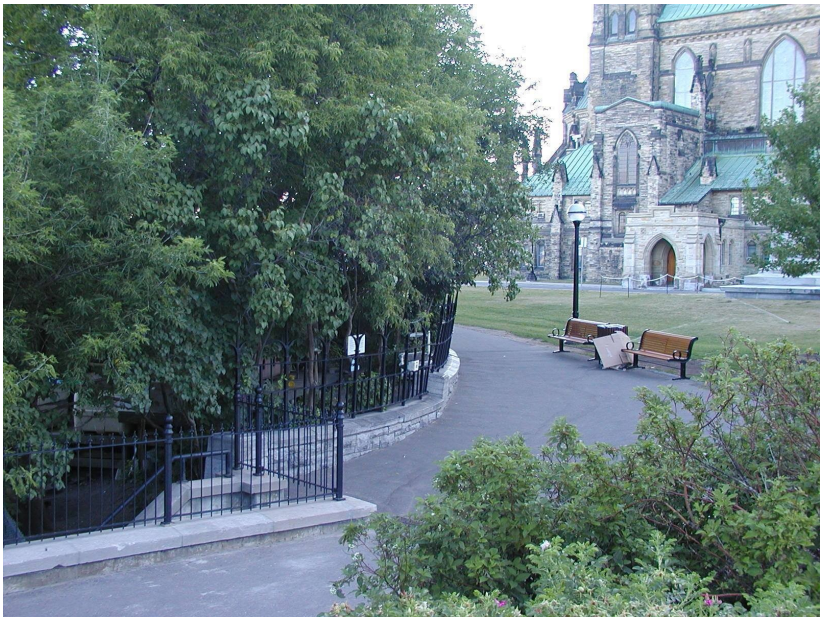
These photographs are not staged images but authentic records of the colony's daily routines: a look inside the small shelters in the snow, scenes of feeding, quiet moments shared between people and cats. They preserve the memory of a time when caring for stray animals in the heart of Canada's capital became a symbol of humanity.

Special thanks go to all volunteers, visitors, and supporters who contributed their heart, time, and dedication to ensure that the cats on the Hill could live with dignity. Their traces remain — in stories, in photographs, and in the quiet warmth of remembrance.

The Volunteer Team on Parliament Hill, Spring 2010

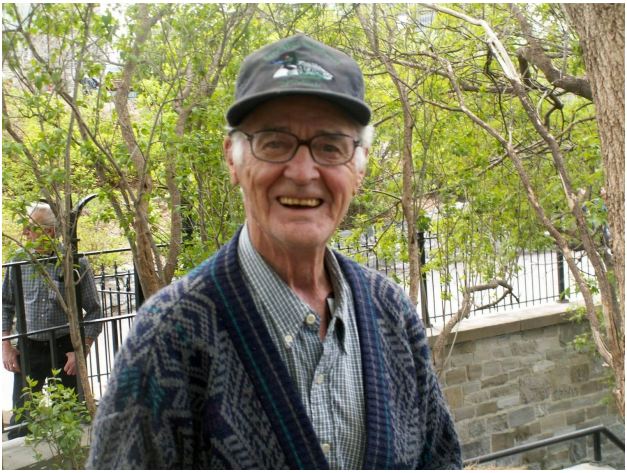
Front row (left to right): Klaus, Suzanne, Lia, Brian, Sally
Back row (l to r): Cheryl, Leyla, Lara, Abigail, Daniel

(Thanks to Brian Caines and Klaus Gerken
for the photograph)



The Cat Sanctuary on Parliament Hill, July 2002

Klaus J. Gerken



Parliament Hill Cats with René Chartrand

Visitors to the Cat Sanctuary at the Canadian Parliament

René Chartrand

“Coal was a sensitive member of the cat family. He was Canada’s last surviving cat on Parliament Hill, a living link to a cherished chapter in our nation’s history.”

Danny Taurozzi is the owner of Coal, the last surviving cat from Parliament Hill

Photo: Julie Oliver / Postmedia

Note on Image Sources

The photographs shown in this appendix come from publicly accessible sources and private archives documenting the life of the Parliament Hill cat colony.

They are used here solely for purposes of remembrance and documentation — as a quiet expression of thanks and as a tribute to the people and cats who shaped this remarkable place.

With respect for the original work and its photographers, this appendix aims to help keep the history and spirit of the colony alive — not as property, but as a shared memory.

For your notes

For your notes

For your notes

Cat Man (Booklet's)